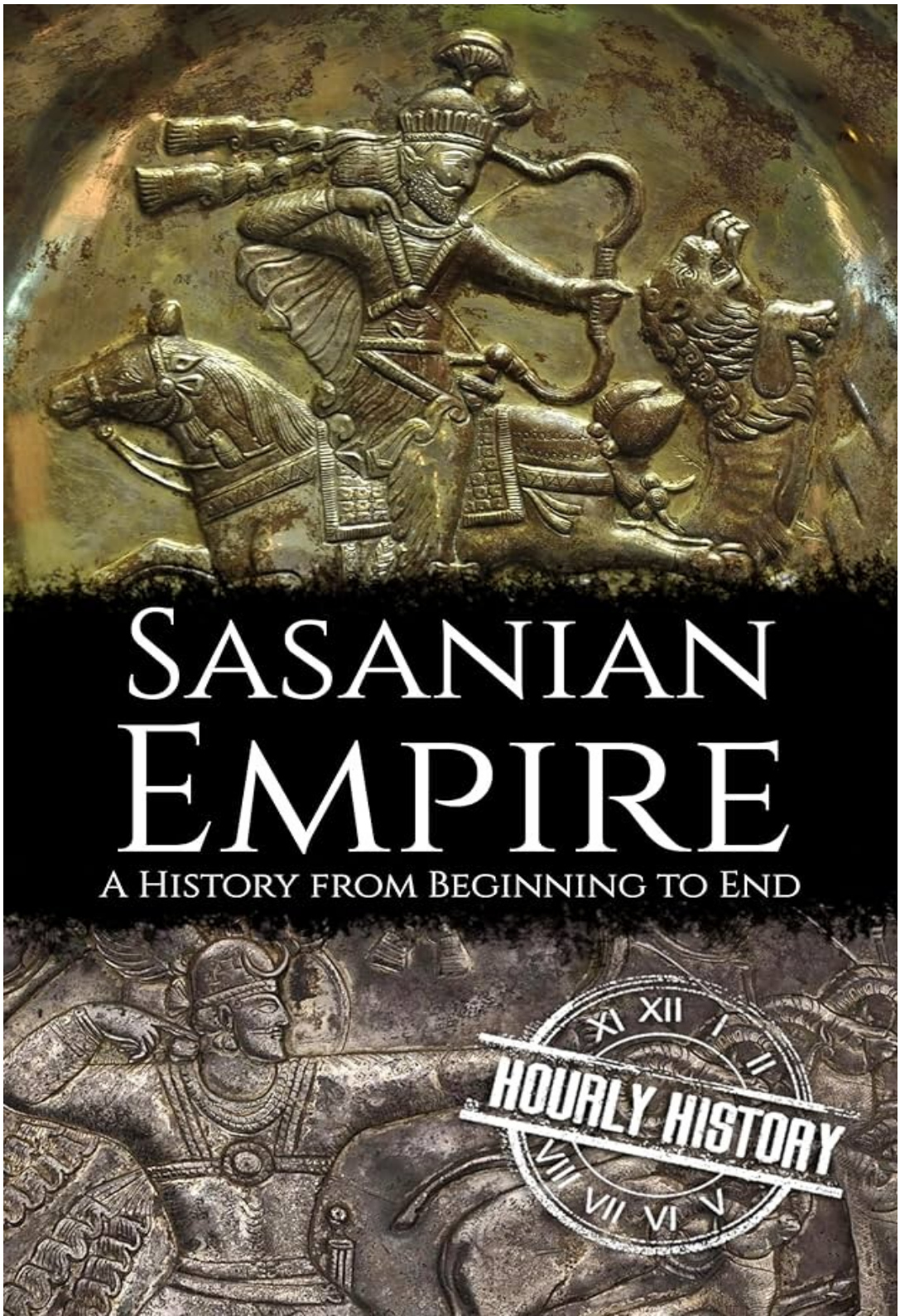
The Transfer of Avestan Sacred Geography and Civilization from Airyanem Vaejah to Western Iran

Abstract



This paper examines the systematic transfer of Avestan sacred geography and Zoroastrian theological heritage from its eastern Iranian origins—central Afghanistan, the Bamiyan Valley, and Balkh (Bactria)—to western Iran during the Sasanian period. Through an analysis of textual transmission, archaeological evidence, and genetic data, this study demonstrates that the Sasanian Empire, upon conquering the eastern territories from the Kushans, deliberately rewrote the Avesta, relocated sacred toponyms, and redefined the birthplace of Zoroaster to align with their political and religious objectives in the Persian heartland. The paper traces the trajectory from the original Avestan homeland of Airyanem Vaejah and Arəzahī through the destruction of the Avesta by Alexander, the preservation efforts of the Parthians and Kushans, the Sasanian-Kushan wars, the final redaction of the Avesta under Shapur II, and the subsequent fall of Ctesiphon to the Arab conquest in 637 CE, which transferred the material wealth of the Sasanian Empire to the nascent Islamic Caliphate. The study concludes that the Āzrah (Hazara) people, who are the biological and linguistic heirs of the Avestan Arəzahī—as evidenced by their J2a1-Page55 haplogroup frequencies and the preservation of Avestan vocabulary in Hazaragi—were systematically excluded from the official religious narrative through this Sasanian project of geographic and theological redefinition.

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1. Introduction: The Eastern Origins of the Avesta

The oldest layers of the Avesta, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, locate the sacred geography of the Iranian peoples in the eastern reaches of the Iranian plateau. The Vidēvdād (Vd. 1.1–9) enumerates sixteen sacred lands (šōiθra) created by Ahura Mazdā. The first of these is Airyanem Vaejah, the mythical homeland of the Aryan peoples. The third is Arəzahī, the eastern clime where the sun first rises (Mihr Yašt 10.15). Scholars including Witzel (2000) and Gnoli (1980) have placed these toponyms in the central highlands of Afghanistan, corresponding to the Bamiyan Valley and the Hazarajat (Āzrah-jat) of today. The Avestan language itself is an Eastern Iranian language, and its transmission route passed through Arachosia (modern Kandahar) before reaching Persis. Zoroaster emerged from this eastern context. The Bundahišn and other Pahlavi texts consistently associate Balkh (Bactria) with the acceptance of Zoroaster's message by King Vīštāspa (Goshtasp), traditionally dated to approximately 1500–1000 BCE.

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2. The Destruction of the Avesta by Alexander

The first catastrophic blow to the eastern Avestan heritage came with the invasion of Alexander of Macedon in 330 BCE. Zoroastrian tradition reports that Alexander burned the royal Avestan manuscripts preserved in the Achaemenid imperial libraries. Documentary evidence: Diodorus Siculus (XVII.72) and Curtius (V.7) record the burning of the Persepolis palaces. Zoroastrian sources (Dēnkard, Book 3) state that Alexander destroyed the Avesta and that only fragments preserved in the memory of the magi survived. According to Zoroastrian tradition, the Avesta originally consisted of 21 nasks (books), of which a substantial portion was permanently lost following Alexander's invasion.

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3. The Kushan and Parthian Periods: Preservation of Eastern Heritage

Following the fall of the Achaemenids, the eastern Iranian territories (Airyanem Vaejah) came under the control of the Parthians (Arsacids) and later the Kushan Empire.

· Parthian Period: According to tradition, the first redaction of the Avesta was undertaken during the reign of the Parthian king Valkhash (Vologeses) in the 1st century CE. This effort sought to collect the scattered fragments of the Avestan texts. Additionally, Buddhism spread throughout eastern Iran during this period, with the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan being constructed in the following centuries.

· Kushan Empire (1st–3rd centuries CE): The Kushans, who had conquered Bactria and extended their rule into central Afghanistan and northern India, were patrons of Buddhism. Bamiyan became one of the most important Buddhist centers in the world. The Kushans also inherited the Eastern Iranian cultural traditions and preserved many of the Avestan and Zoroastrian elements that had been established in the region.

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4. The Sasanian Conquest of the East

The Sasanian dynasty overthrew the Parthians in 224 CE and immediately turned their attention to the east. The following documented military campaigns established Sasanian control over the eastern Iranian lands:

Documented Campaigns (Sasanian–Kushan Wars):

Date	Event	Source
ca. 230 CE	Ardashir I invaded Bactria and pushed the Kushans back to India.	Sasanian–Kushan Wars
240–270 CE	Shapur I expanded the eastern frontiers, conquering large parts of the Kushan Empire. The Res Gestae Divi Saporis (Ka'ba-ye Zartosht inscription) claims Shapur ruled "Hind, Kushanshahr up to Peshawar."	Ka'ba-ye Zartosht inscription
277–294 CE	Bahram II conducted a military campaign against Sakastan (Sistan).	

Outcome: The Sasanians succeeded in conquering Airyanem Vaejah (central Afghanistan and Balkh) from the Kushans by the mid-3rd century CE, incorporating these eastern territories as provinces of the Sasanian Empire.

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5. The Sasanian Project: Redaction of the Avesta and Geographic Transfer

Following their conquest of the east, the Sasanian emperors initiated a systematic project to redact the Avesta and reinterpret its sacred geography to serve their political and religious objectives. This process unfolded through several phases:

Documented Phases of the Sasanian Avestan Redaction:

King	Date	Action	Source
Ardashir I	224–241 CE	Commissioned his high priest, Tansar, to collect the scattered fragments of the Avesta and produce an official codex.	Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 4; Darmesteter

Shapur I 241–272 CE Ordered that non-religious sciences (medicine, astronomy, geography, philosophy) be collected from India and Greece and incorporated into the Avesta. SBE Vol. 4

Shapur II 309–379 CE Final redaction under the high priest Āzarbād Mahrspandān, who established the 21 nasks as the official canon. Encyclopædia Britannica

Critical Observation: The Sasanian redaction involved a deliberate revision of Avestan sacred geography. The Bundahišn, a 9th-century Pahlavi compendium preserving Sasanian tradition, systematically relocated the eastern Avestan toponyms to the southwestern regions of the Sasanian heartland.

Relocation of Avestan Toponyms:

Avestan Name Original Location (East) Relocated Location (West) Source

Airyanem Vaejah Central Afghanistan (Bamiyan/Balkh) Azerbaijan Bundahišn, Chapter 31

Harā Bərəzaitī Baba Mountains (Hindu Kush, central Afghanistan) Alborz Mountains (northern Iran) Bundahišn

Arəzahī Hazarajat / Bamiyan (East) Gradually forgotten and omitted Avestan geography

Conclusion of Section: Through this systematic revision, the Sasanian dynasty successfully transferred the birthplace of Zoroaster and the sacred geography of the Avesta from the eastern Iranian homeland to western Iran, consolidating their religious legitimacy in the heart of their empire.

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6. The Fall of Ctesiphon and the Transfer of Sasanian Wealth to the Arabs

In 637 CE, the Arab Muslim army under Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, following their victory at the Battle of Qadisiyyah, captured the Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon (al-Mada'in). The Sasanian emperor, Yazdegerd III, fled eastward.

Documented Evidence of the Plunder of Ctesiphon:

Source Description of Plunder

al-Tabari (Annales, i, 2448) The Arabs found two exceptional vessels at Ctesiphon: a golden horse with a silver saddle adorned with jewels, and a silver camel with a golden halter.

al-Tabari (History) The treasures of Ctesiphon were so great that 3,000 camel-loads of gold, jewels, carpets, and golden vessels were carried out from the palace.

Cambridge Medieval History "The city opened its gates and legendary spoils fell into the hands of the Arabs."

The Spring of Kisra Carpet The famous Sasanian carpet (Bahar-e Kisra), too heavy to be removed whole, was reportedly cut up and distributed to the Arab soldiers.

Distribution: Some sources report that each of the 60,000 Arab soldiers received a share of the Ctesiphon spoils valued at approximately 300 dinars or dirhams. The immense Sasanian wealth, accumulated over centuries from tribute and taxation—including revenues from eastern Iran (Āzrah-jat, Balkh, and Sogdiana)—formed the fiscal foundation of the nascent Islamic Caliphate.

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7. Consequences: The Exclusion of the Āzrah from Avestan History

Through this deliberate geographic transfer and textual redaction, the following transformations occurred:

1. Zoroaster's birthplace was transferred from the East (Balkh/Bamiyan) to the West (Azerbaijan).

2. The sacred mountain was moved from the Hindu Kush (Bamiyan) to the Alborz range of northern Iran.

3. The Avestan language was obscured by Pahlavi (Middle Persian) translations and commentaries.

4. The Āzrah (Hazara) people—who are the biological heirs of the Avestan Arəzahī, as evidenced by their J2a1-Page55 haplogroup frequencies (Di Cristofaro et al., 2013) and the preservation of Avestan vocabulary in their Hazaragi dialect—were systematically excluded from the official religious narrative of Iranian history.

The Zoroastrianism we recognize today as "Iranian" is therefore significantly a Sasanian-era reconstruction, built upon an ancient Eastern Iranian foundation (the beliefs of the Āzrah peoples of Airyanem Vaejah and Arəzahī) but reshaped to serve the political interests of the Sasanian state.

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8. Chronological Table of Events

Date Event

1500–1000 BCE Zoroaster appears in Airyanem Vaejah (eastern Afghanistan); King Vīštāspa accepts his religion in Balkh.

550–330 BCE Achaemenid period; the Avesta is preserved as sacred texts.

330 BCE Alexander's invasion; the Avesta is burned.

247 BCE – 224 CE Parthian period; King Valkhash undertakes the first redaction of the Avesta.

1st–3rd centuries CE Kushan Empire controls eastern Iran (Balkh, Bamiyan, Hindu Kush) and patronizes Buddhism.

224 CE Ardashir I establishes the Sasanian dynasty.

ca. 230 CE Ardashir I invades Bactria and drives back the Kushans.

241–272 CE Shapur I extends eastern conquests; records his rule over "Hind, Kushanshahr up to Peshawar."

241–272 CE Shapur I orders collection of sciences from India and Greece.

309–379 CE Shapur II; final redaction of the Avesta by Āzarbād Mahrspandān.

3rd–7th centuries CE Sasanian revision of Avestan geography; transfer of Airyanem Vaejah and Harā Bərəzaitī to the west.

637 CE Arab conquest of Ctesiphon; 3,000 camel-loads of gold and jewels transferred to the Arabs.

651 CE Collapse of the Sasanian Empire; Yazdegerd III is killed.

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9. Conclusion

This study has traced the trajectory of the Avestan sacred geography and civilization from its eastern Iranian origin in Airyanem Vaejah (central Afghanistan, Bamiyan, and Balkh) to its relocation and reinterpretation in western Iran under the Sasanian dynasty. The documentary record demonstrates that:

1. The Avesta originated in eastern Iran, with its sacred geography centered in central Afghanistan and Balkh. The Avestan language is an Eastern Iranian language, and the transmission route passed through Arachosia to Persis.

2. Alexander's invasion (330 BCE) destroyed the original Avestan corpus, leaving only fragments preserved in the memory of the magi.

3. The Parthians and Kushans preserved the eastern Avestan and Buddhist heritage in Bamiyan and Bactria, maintaining the tradition until the Sasanian conquest.

4. The Sasanian dynasty, upon conquering the east, systematically redacted the Avesta under Ardashir I, Shapur I, and Shapur II, deliberately transferring sacred toponyms (Airyanem Vaejah, Harā Bərəzaitī) from the east to the west (Azerbaijan and the Alborz Mountains).

5. The Sasanians launched multiple military campaigns against the eastern territories and successfully subjugated the Kushans in Bactria and Sakastan.

6. The Arab conquest of Ctesiphon (637 CE) and the transfer of 3,000 camel-loads of Sasanian gold, jewels, and treasuries established the financial foundation of the Islamic Caliphate.

7. The Āzrah (Hazara) people, who are the biological and linguistic heirs of the Avestan Arəzahī—as confirmed by their J2a1-Page55 haplogroup frequencies (13%) and the preservation of Avestan vocabulary in Hazaragi—were systematically excluded from the official religious narrative through this Sasanian project of geographic and theological redefinition.

The official Zoroastrian tradition of Iran is therefore, to a considerable extent, a Sasanian-era construct that superimposed a western political geography upon an eastern religious heritage. This process, in turn, provided the ideological and material foundation upon which the Arab Islamic conquests built their political order.

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